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**A provincial archive and the study of rural transformations in
Khorezm¹**

Surrounded by cotton fields, at the outskirts of the small town Yangibazar ('*Raizentr*' of the homonymous district placed along the lower riversides of the Amudarya), the district (*tuman/rayon*) branch of the Khorezm state archive is located in an inconspicuous two-stored building of the 1980's, half occupied by a pharmacy, and half filled with some 80.000 documents gathered together from various close-by administrations, enterprises and organizations (uzb. '*tashqilat*'). In this building, from spring until autumn 2004, I enjoyed the help and assistance of the staff of the archive, while I was collecting data helping me to bring a bit of historical depth into my investigations on the current evolutions in and around the villages of the district. As I am writing at a socio-anthropological dissertation about the political economy of today's Khorezmian rural society, the engagement with archival work was not an obvious step, but rather the result of a well reflected choice. The intention was to back my work's emphasis on the contemporary events and transformations of the agricultural system with which I was immediately confronted with in my fieldwork, with information and figures on a longer time span, in order to put today's picture "in perspective". There are obvious historical reasons for why an attitude of mistrust prevails among anthropologists and (Western) social scientists towards data and statistics of the Soviet and post-Soviet

agricultural apparatus, which document local production and its organization before, around, and after the notorious cotton scandal. This attitude contributes to explaining why archives have been so seldom called on to look for answers to the present conditions, or at least for questions. Delivering debatable and not always reliable information, being difficult to access, and time consuming, in Uzbekistan most scholars of the contemporary have been eager to downplay the importance of the written sources produced by the system they are studying. In disagreement with this practice, and in the hope to revise some cliché around the inner life of the Soviet and post-Soviet organizations characteristic of the rural site, I decided to take them seriously. My investigation could start beginning of May 2004, after a '*prikaz*' signed by the deputy regional *hakim* for cultural affairs finally opened the doors of the Yangibazar district archive to me.

The idea to integrate my research on the recently accomplished decollectivization of agriculture in Yangibazar with a study on the agricultural development of the district through the sources of the local archive had to face two immediate practical constraints. First, being subsidiary to my fieldwork, the archival work had to be designed and organized in a way not to hamper too much my daily interviews and interactions with the actors of the agricultural sector. Therefore, after a closer look at the available material and after defining a feasible and coherent data gathering strategy, I instructed two assistants for the collection of the actual data. For this reason I had to privilege numerical data, and simple information over more complex narrative sources. Most of the time my contact with the documents of the archive were filtered through Rano Sabirova, and especially through Zulmira Jabbarova, both former students of the University of Urgench, with which we had a regular and lively dialogue over the data collection process. Second, as I had no previous training and experience about how to work in an Uzbek district state archive, I had to acquire confidence over methods and over the adequate way to proceed in a process of learning by doing, ending up hence and forth with some beginner's mistake. Especially in this latter regard, I found in Matyakub Sherjanov, director of the archive since the last 10 years, a devoted and supportive interlocutor, whose insights and advices have been of inestimable value for my work. Himself an expert on the local history of Yangibazar, whose still-not-but-soon-to-be published book on Yangibazar resumes a life dedicated to the collection of local stories and memories in and about his native district, Matyakub Sherjanov's working day since he came into the archive used to be divided between the mornings spent at his desk in the

archive, and the afternoons dedicated to the collection of oral histories in the villages of the district and to interviews with former local personalities and with the eldest inhabitants of the rayon. Sharing the same interest for the local history, together we occasionally went to interview people, attend events, and visit places of the district bearing significance for our work. What is missing in the statistics of the archive sometimes is the “real life” Matyakub Sherjanov sometimes used to tell me in dispute with the writings of other local scholars, and his locally informed insights often contributed a great deal for filling this gap in my own data. Often, while I came up with questions on some unknown acronym, some incongruent data, or some missing ‘fond’², his answers would lead to long digressions on local stories and personalities, and we would end in discussing the “when’s and how’s” of an altogether new aspect, inevitably ending with the statement: “*ishlar nihoyatda murakkab...*”^{*}

A glance on Yangibazar district through the archival sources

While most anthropological analyses of rural transformations in Central Asia privilege the village or the former kolkhoz as its unit of analysis, my idea was it to approach a *rayon* as an administrative body, and as a political and social carrier of “community” defined more at large. I selected Yangibazar as my case study for fieldwork because here, one out of four pilot districts over all the republic, in the process of the acceleration of the reform of the agricultural sector all shirkats were disbanded and substituted by private farm enterprises (*‘fermer khüjaligi’*), anticipating a nation-wide trend³. As a consequence, the district state archive acquired the documentation of the 11 dismissed shirkats (including in their turn that of the predecessors of the Soviet period — 9 kolkhozes and 2 sovkhoses). Together with Khiva and Hanka, Yangibazar is one of the three district level branches of the Khorezmian state archive in Urgench. According to Sherjanov, the archive can keep three kinds of documents: decrees of the district authorities (*“davlat ukazlari”*), documentation on the various organizations of the district (*tashkilot*), and biographical sources and notes on local personalities. In the Yangibazar branch of the state archive the documentations of all *‘tashqilat’* for the neighboring Shavat, Gurlen, and Urgench Rayon, are also stored. But only in Yangibazar all shirkats were so far dismantled, so that only here their papers became available *en bloque* and thus became accessible for my study.

^{*} “(our) work is infinitely complicated...”

The historical horizon of the analysis was determined by the data quality and availability: The district archive had to deliver all materials going back to the early collectivization period and before to the central regional archive in Urgench, for which a special permission was necessary—therefore I left them out. Also, manuscripts and documents older than 1924 are stored in the Republican state archive in Tashkent and were out of reach to me. In the Yangibazar archive, the documentation on the kolkhozes starts to become roughly complete only from late 1940's onwards, while data referring to the period before and during WWII seemed to be incomplete. Because of this, and because of the frequent merging and reorganizing of the kolkhozes of the district in the years between early collectivization and the late 1950s, I started to systematically look at data on the agricultural evolution of Yangibazar district only starting from the year 1960. However, in a list of 11 '*dalolatnama*'⁴, documenting the acquisition by the state archive of the documentation on the kolkhozes that disappeared after merging with other kolkhozes, and of other organizations relevant to agriculture, it was possible to reconstruct the situation in flux of the years before 1960. From 1936 (oldest mention of a kolkhoz in the documents I saw) until 1962 the names of 28 different kolkhozes are stated in these '*dalolatnama*'. By 1960 the process of aggregation was almost accomplished. With one exception (a kolkhoz dismissed in 1962 to get merged with a bigger one), all agricultural activity in the district already pertained to the 8 'historical' kolkhozes of Yangibazar. These were: Kuybishev (later known as a Shirkat under the name: Bogholon), Leninizm (Busqala), XXI Part sezd (Xalqabad), Oktyabr XIV-nchi yilligi (Hamza), Moskva (Khorezm), Madaniyat (Madaniyat), Leningrad (Shirinkungrad), Pravda (Uzbekistan). They represent administrative units whose figures, under changed names, can be followed up until 2002. After 1960, the changes become rare and units more stable: from 1960 to 2002 the only substantial novelty is that two sovkhozes were newly established in 1966/67 (Oktyabr 50-inchi yilligi — later: Buston) and in 1976 (Rossiya — later: Jayhun). The last (very small) kolkhoz was created in the early 1980's (Sanjar) for the specialization on fodder, although in some respect it remained subsidiary to the largest kolkhoz of the district 'Kuybishev/Bogholon', from which it split.

In Yangibazar this process of decollectivization was accomplished by 1st January 2003, when all shirkats were dismantled, their lands passing to private '*fermer*' enterprises. The tractors and a land reserve of the former *shirkats* were reorganized into MTP's (motor tractor park), which legally

represent a private company, but that de facto are controlled by the district and continue to carry out a number of functions formerly hold by the kolkhozes before and by the shirkats later. Most of the large agricultural enterprises with names too reminiscent of the Soviet epoch were renamed in 1993 or later, some retained their original name. I have arbitrarily circumscribed the period for my analysis between 1960 and the decollectivization end of 2002, as the most suitable for a long time comparison of well-documented and roughly constant units, with only little change in the overall framework (administrative continuity of the kolkhoz/sovkhoz/shirkat).

While the boundaries of the kolkhozes and sovkhozes within the territory of today's Yangibazar had almost no change over the period of analysis, the district Yangibazar itself was suppressed and re-established several times and did not represent a unit of continuity. The reasons behind these switches tell something about the Soviet rural development logic, but I also suppose the existence of particular constellations of interest. The archival documentation shows the evolution of the administration of this territory: Yangibazar was the last of the districts in Khorezm to be introduced as autonomous *rayon* in 1950, as a measure to bring "development" into the rural areas, by putting together the peripheral areas around the neighboring larger historical centers Urgench, Shavat, and Gurlen. The decision was then reverted in 1958 for reasons which remained unclear to me. However, a connection with the reorganization of the tractor use occurring in those years in the districts seems to be likely. 1950-55 are the years of intensified mechanization, in which tractors started to increasingly replace manual seeding, leveling, fertilizing, and other agricultural activities formerly done by hand. While they were more depending on the one central district machinery facility (MTS) at the beginning, with their own tractor- and machinery parks gradually growing kolkhozes became less dependent. Whatever the reason, in 1958 the Yangibazar district administration was again suspended, and its territory re-divided between the neighboring *rayons* of Urgench in the south (65 % of the territory) and Gurlen in the north (35 %). This lasted until 1980, date of re-establishment of the district. "Economic" reasons, namely the distance from the two '*Raizentr*' Gurlen and Urgench, seem to have led to the re-establishing of the district suppressed 32 years before⁵. The establishment of a new territorial/administrative unit follows a logic reproduced at the different levels of the administrative ladder. So, i.e., in a similar fashion in which Yangibazar district was created on the basis of peripheries 're-

centered' around a newly established administration and infrastructure (roads, allocation of tractors etc.), the Sovkhoz '50th anniversary of October revolution', nowadays 'Buston', has been created by putting together three marginal brigades at the edges of the neighboring kolkhozes 'Uzbekistan', 'Hamza', and 'Xalqabad', and enhancing them with infrastructure, machinery, and an administrative building complex at its center. Later on, but only for a year (June 1988- June 1989), Yangibazar district was suppressed again and subdivided into Urgench and Gurlen, reintroducing the delimitations of 1958. The vicissitudes of the district in the late 1980's, however, to some extent develop in parallel to the political career of a well-known personality native of the village Ayakdurman (village of the kolkhoz 'XXI partya sezd', 'Xalqabad' after 1992). Before becoming regional *hakim* of Khorezm the energetic Marx Jumaniyazov was appointed district *hakim* of Urgench Rayon in 1988, year in which his natal kolkhoz rejoined the territory of Urgench. Before becoming regional ('viloyat') *hakim*, Yangibazar was again reinstalled as a district. In 'Xalqabad', the newest administration building of all Kolkhozes of Yangibazar, dated 1991, recall the commitment of the former regional *hakim* to his native place. In the archival sources the frequent changes of the administrative bodies create difficulties to the analysis from today's point of view, as overall district-level bookkeeping on agricultural data has been discontinuous. Since June 1989 Yangibazar did not change its status and its boundaries as a district.

Besides the administrative "fluctuations", changing river flows and the intensification of agriculture also have affected the territory of Yangibazar. Towards North-East Yangibazar district borders with the Amudarya, whose unsteady riverbanks also were delimiting the borders with Karakalpakistan. As an evidence for former river floats and boundaries, a territory of several hundreds of hectares left of the Amudarya, in the former sovkhov 'Russia' (later as a shirkat: 'Jayhun'), today is in perpetual borrowing from Karakalpakistan. Once, in between the cropped areas and the "unruly" riverbed there was a buffer of 10.000 hectares of Tugai forest, ranging from Cholish in Urgench Rayon until Gurlen district. In Yangibazar, most of it fell under the expansion of the agricultural area of the district, beginning from the mid of 1970's and accomplished in few years. In Yangibazar the deforestation went hand in hand with the establishment of the rice growing Sovkhoz 'Russia' in 1976 – for which many Koreans were employed from neighboring districts Urgench and Gurlen⁶. One year after the establishment of the sovkhov on ca. 4000 ha of forest, the forest area was reduced to 765 ha⁷. In 1981⁸ this area further shrunk to only 50 ha. Besides

deforestation, agricultural expansion also took other directions: all five major lakes of the district were dried out and turned into arable surface⁹. The expansion of the agricultural areas reached its peak during the 1980's. It is difficult to say something about the years of the cotton scandal at district level, as documents of the 'Ispolkom' were not available from 1980 until 1986. According to the staff of the archive they went lost in the moving to the archive. Documents about core years of some kolkhozes (Kuybishev/Bogholon 1981-89, 1992-1994; Hamza 1995-2002; Uzbekistan 1965, 1979, 1994-2002; Sanjar before 1987) were also missing. At district level, documents of the Yangibazar cotton collection point ("*pakhta qabul qilish punkti*") testify its existence over the period from 1947 until 1970¹⁰. From 1969 (1967?) onwards an own district cotton gin was operative¹¹, underpinning the parity of the district with the other *rayons*, but these documents were not checked.

The kolkhoz bookkeeping: data and problems

The Yangibazar state archive has neither a general catalogue with a description of the documents, nor a guidebook to the archival documents, but a rather confusing '*fondlar rüykhati*', a list of the fonds. Every fond of an organization ('*tashqilat*') is listed in a separate sheet. This creates a difficulty, in that it makes it difficult to get an overview over 'what is there', while it is easier to follow up the documents of one single organization, if they are listed in the same sheet. For this reason I have privileged a systematic view over certain kinds of documents, rather than varying among documents of different organizations. Archival work has been focused on the documents produced in and by the kolkhozes and sovkhozes, later on turning into shirkats. These documents were of three different kinds: (1.) the production plan, compiled at the beginning of the year ("*moliyaviy ishlab chiqarish plani*"), and, at the end of the year, (2.) the final yearly balance ("*yillik hisabati/otchyoti*"); they contain the detailed bookkeeping and statistic about the overall economic figures of the kolkhozes, also including information about the employees and their families, as well as a balance over the use of land and over the overall stock of the kolkhoz. These two types of documents were standardized forms used by all kolkhozes all over the Soviet Union. They were compiled by the chief bookkeeper ('*glavnyi buhgalter*') of the kolkhoz and signed by the kolkhoz manager. Over the years 1960-2002 the forms slightly change roughly every ten years. Every form is compiled in three copies: one for the agricultural department of the district ('*RaiSelVodkhoz*'), one for the district department for statistics ('*Raistat*'),

and one to remain in the kolkhoz (which now ended up into the archive). The third sort of document is the protocol book (3.), which was produced in a single copy and remained in the kolkhoz. The protocol books have no special form. They contain the minutes of all plenary sessions and of all extraordinary gatherings within the farms. They were partly written by hand, partly by machine, most of the time in Uzbek, and cover several books for every kolkhoz. Protocol books ended with the introduction of the shirkats, but already before entries were not as detailed as in the early years (1960's-1970's). As the sovkhozes were state owned, they had no protocol books for the gatherings of the collective. Instead they had a book of the orders ("*prikaz daftari*"), in which in theory every 'order' (deliberation) concerning the sovkhoz management had to be reported. The detailed protocol books of the kolkhozes were not studied, as this would have been too time consuming. Nevertheless, the *prikaz*-books of the two sovkhozes were considered, because they were easier to handle (shorter, and entirely machine written). Here it appears that one sovkhoz barely has entries, whereas the other has a very accurate registry. These '*prikaz*-books' deliver some information about the inner life of the sovkhozes. 78 orders (*buyruq/prikaz*) of particular interest were selected and copied.

Three kinds of information were extracted from the final yearly balances and processed into excel file sheets: 1. data on the administrative links and on the yearly composition of the staff of the kolkhozes/sovkhozes/shirkats¹², 2. data on the yearly production figures¹³, and 3. data on population and on land allocation¹⁴. The reliability of the collected data became an issue every time we had to deal with inexact or incomplete documents. These kinds of problems often appeared after a closer look at the yearly production figures: here the sum of the different areas allocated to different crops often did not coincide with the figure given as the total amount of land for a specific year. However, these problems are not specific to the Yangibazar archive but link up with the general conditions of the Soviet (and post-Soviet) data production and management¹⁵. A general premise is that aggregated data produced by the statistical committees were less reliable and more exposed to manipulation, in that they were made to fit to given target figures. In this respect unaggregated data can be more interesting, although it is often secreted by the authorities, thus uneasy to access. Working data produced by the organizations themselves are less exposed to this risk. Nevertheless, they are not entirely secure from manipulation. In her work on a kolkhoz in Buryatia, C. Humphrey extensively engages with the problem of the reliability of the figures

produced and used at local level, which seem to be the same type of documents I could access in the archive of Yangibazar. Her conclusion is that it is “probably fair to say that all units, and therefore to a greater degree all farms, operate in an atmosphere of approximation”¹⁶.

Yet it seems to me that rather than being deprived of any significance, it is important to understand the data in the light of the context in which they are produced. Interviews with the staff of the archive, and sometimes with the authors of the data, convinced me that although approximated, in most cases the figures were rather reliable. Mistakes in many cases could be easily identified, while incongruence rather pertained to circumscribed years and areas. “Holes” coming up in the data set due to incompleteness were more problematic. Therefore, although the collected figures of the kolkhozes and sovkhoses have their shortcomings, it does not automatically void them of any worth and usefulness. During the analysis of the data I tried to explain and contextualize the reasons for belief and skepticism towards the collected material in every single case, always keeping in mind that they bear a portion of risk. Beyond of its significance for its own, the output of the archive has represented a body of information which enabled me to conduct better informed interviews with local actors knowledgeable of the circumstances the archival data were referring to and helped tracing the evolution of the social and economic conditions of a district over a long period of time. An adequate discussion of the results of my archival research obviously goes beyond the scope of this note and will be done elsewhere. Certainly, a preliminary finding of my work is that in Uzbekistan archival research could deserve more attention by the scholars of the contemporary, as it can fruitfully complement and enrich fieldwork oriented investigations.

NOTES

1. This study was carried out within the framework of the ZEF/UNESCO Khorezm project (“Economic and Ecological Restructuring of Land and Water Use in the Region Khorezm (Uzbekistan)”). My acknowledgements for funding go to the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF; project number 0339970A).
2. Folders in which the archival documents are stored and organized.
3. After Independence kolkhozes and sovkhoses were gradually turned into shirkats — joint stock companies. These were the post-Soviet equivalents of the kolkhozes, with little change in management style and operational practice. This process is described in: Alisher ILKHAMOV, “Shirkats, Dekhqon farmers and others: farm

restructuring in Uzbekistan”, *Central Asian Survey*, 17 (4)-(1998), p. 539-560. However, with the recently started disbandment of the shirkats more substantial reforming of the agricultural sector is on the way.

4. “Dalolatnama 1-11”, 14th June 2001, *Khorezm Davlat Arxivi, Yangibazar filiali*.

5. Personal communication of Matyakub Sherjanov and of two district officers.

6. ‘Russia’ sovkhoz, however, is not mentioned by Songmoo Kho, who otherwise very accurately reports on the Korean rural communities of Khorezm, i.e. on the rice-growing sovkhozes in the neighboring districts Gurlen and Hanka. See: Songmoo KHO, “Koreans in Soviet Central Asia”, *Studia Orientalia*, Ed. by the Finnish Oriental Society, Helsinki, 1987, p. 90.

7. F350/1/4

8. F350/1/12

9. The largest lake was Devankul. It extended over more than 1000 hectares, 50 % of which were in the territory of the district. For the history of the lakes of Yangibazar see: Matyakub SHERJANOV, “Yangibazarning katta küllari”, *Yangibazar Küzgusi*, 15th August 2003, p. 3.

10. “Dalolatnama n.9”, 14th June 2001

11. “Dalolatnama n.10”, 14th June 2001. During a visit at the district cotton gin I was told that the gin opened in 1967. However, documents in the archive begin from 1969.

12. In the first sheet information on the name of the *rayon*, of the village council, of the enterprise, and of the available staff members were collected. Recurring positions were those of the kolkhoz chairman, accountant, chief economist, chief agronomist, chief zootechnician, chief engineer, land measurer, deputy of kolkhoz chairman, and chief of inspection. Change in staff sometimes could be detected by looking at the signatures of the documents, while sometimes the appointment of staff was explicitly mentioned in the protocols.

13. The areas attributed to every crop (in hectares) and the harvest (in tons) of every crop of each available year was collected. The crops considered in the forms were the following: cotton, potato, vegetables (cabbage, cucumber, tomato), melons and gourds, total forage crops, total grain crops and leguminous plants, spring wheat, winter grain crops, maize, mungbean, millet, rice, sorghum, barley, pea, grapes, fruits, sugar-beet. Data on fertilizers, machinery, and livestock were not considered, due to the shortage of time.

14. In the third sheet data was collected on the kolkhoz specialization, population, number of households, total area of the kolkhoz, total agricultural lands, area under state crop (*‘ekinzorlar’*), area grown with hay for fodder (*‘pichanzorlar’*), pasture, forest area, *“tamorka”* lands of collective farmers, short-term rented *‘ekinzorlar’*, total irrigated area, fallow lands, ponds and reservoirs, longstanding seed plots, deposit and virgin lands. Since 1986 data on population was not available, because the form had changed and figures moved to the local soviet councils (*‘sel’soviet’*).

15. Recently appeared on the making and unmaking of statistical data in the Soviet Union: Alain BLUM, Martine MESPOULET, *L’Anarchie bureaucratique, Statistique et pouvoir sous Staline*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

16. Caroline HUMPHREY, *Karl Marx Collective. Economy, society and religion in a Siberian collective farm*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 199 (see chapter 4 on the production of data in the kolkhoz).